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RESEARCH AND THE CLASSROOM TEACHER.

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THE DIFFICULTIES ENCOUNTERED BY THE CLASSROOM TEACHER WHEN HE TURNS TO RESEARCH FOR FRACTICAL SOLUTIONS TO THE SPECIFIC FROBLEMS OF TEACHING READING ARE DISCUSSED. IT IS ACKNOWLEDGED THAT RESEARCH SELDOM CREATES IDEAS FOR THE CLASSROOM. INSTEAD, GOOD TEACHING GENERATES IDEAS FOR RESEARCH. NEVERTHELESS, READING TEACHERS SHOULD NOT IGNORE RESEARCH. EVEN LIMITED STUDIES INDICATE THAT THERE IS MUCH TO LEARN, THAT FEW ANSWERS ARE FINAL, AND THAT THERE IS NO ONE METHOD TO TEACH READING. CONTROLLED RESEARCH PRESERVES THE ATTITUDE OF SCIENTIFIC INQUIRY. NON-STATISTICAL ANALYSES OF THE READING PROCESS ARE IMPORTANT SOURCES OF ENLIGHTENMENT. INTROSPECTIVE ACCOUNTS SUCH AS THOSE USED BY STRANG, PIEKARCZ, MCKILLIP, SQUIRE, AND OTHERS OFFER INSIGHTS INTO TEACHING AND ARE MORE VALUABLE THAN THE OVERSIMFLIFIED, STATISTICALLY NEAT DESIGN. (RH)

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XI Research in the Pedagogy of Reading
Thursday, May 4, 2:30 - 3:45 P.M.

RESEARCH AND THE CLASSROOM TEACHER

The classroom teacher views research with mixed emotions. On the one hand, he hopes that research will provide security; he desperately needs to know that what he is doing is "right," that a particular approach to teaching reading is not only approved in theory and experience, but is somehow scientifically verifiable. On the other hand, he is confused by conflicting results, and is soon convinced that partial truths are more mystifying than total ignorance. Lacking confidence in his ability

[illegible] statistics, [illegible] "If figures can't lie, liars can figure." Since he feels [illegible] research ought to offer him--security--he is [illegible] it. So he comes hopefully to conferences [illegible], and as often as not he leaves disappointed, complaining [illegible] no practical solutions.

In this half-hearted affair between [illegible] and the teacher, who is at fault? Both parties, of course. Research in reading, especially at upper grade levels, especially in the measurement of comprehension, especially in classroom studies, is fragmented, quasi-experimental, peppered by errors that are ignored or concealed. "What does research say to the classroom teacher?" "Very little"--and even that little must be taken with caution. Reading research is still in its infancy and we must not yet ask it to do a man's job. So far it has been most successful in revealing <u>what</u> children do when they read, although it has still not told us <u>why</u> or even <u>how</u> they do it. As we begin to examine the more complex aspects of reading and as we study the <u>teaching</u> of reading in the classroom (as both these gentlemen have attempted), we know that our research tools are less than adequate for the complex job. (Someone has said that these tools are about as precise as an elastic tape measure.)

But classroom teachers must be faulted, too, for demanding too much. The best that research can do is to verify assumptions, and so no matter how perfect the design, how advanced the statistical treatment, its usefulness is always limited to the quality of the hypothesis. Research very seldom <u>creates</u> ideas for the classroom. It's the other way around, of course. Good teaching generates ideas for research.

Reading teachers are at fault, too, when they draw implications for practice from a single investigation. Very few single studies are of such magnitude that their findings should be expected to influence classroom practices. However, an accumulation of studies can suggest tentative answers to questions of methodology. I'm thinking, for example, of the large number of studies testing the effectiveness of various machines in increasing speed of comprehension. They tend to support the conclusion that machines are by no means essential.

Nevertheless, reading teachers are not justified in turning their backs upon research. When viewed in proper perspective, individual studies, for all their limitations, can help us to learn more about the process of learning and the process of teaching. Even limited studies can help us to realize how much we need to know, can remind us that very few answers are final, can protect us from the claims of practitioners who would have us believe that their method is the only way to teach reading. Controlled research is a necessary adjunct in teaching reading because it preserves in us the attitude of scientific inquiry, an attitude which is all the more essential in a profession dedicated to the mysterious mind of man.

Research serves us best when it generates new questions and the studies we've just heard illustrate this proposition. Mr. Lawson started with a practical classroom problem: what proportion of the daily reading period in sixth grade should be devoted to the reading of freely selected books? His design imposed limitations; that is, his question became: Over a period of 12 weeks, if we expect improvement as measured by a standardized

reading test, what part of a 45-minute daily period should be spent on free reading? His answer appears to be that spending no time at all on free reading is as good as 15 minutes out of 45, and better than 30 minutes or 45 minutes. Can we take that answer at face value? No, because his study leaves a number of questions unanswered. What differences in experience, competency, attitudes, were there among the twelve teachers? Were there differences in results among the three classrooms for each of the four methods? What happened in each of the classrooms? Was the free reading period managed equally well in all nine classrooms? What kinds of books were available?

Even when taken at face value, the results are puzzling. Why should the conventional group rank highest in comprehension and third in word knowledge? Why should 30 minutes a day in basal readers produce greater gains in word knowledge than any other method and less gain in reading achievement? (The 30-minute basal classes were equal in gains to the 45-minute individualized classes, which in fact, lost in achievement.)

The three classes in the individualized method lost in achievement for both word knowledge and reading. Why? Were the three teachers using this method inexperienced in individualized reading techniques whereas the other teachers were experienced with basals? Were the children in the individualized classes motivated to read but not to learn? For example, did self-selection mean that they chose books below their instructional level? Were they uninstructed in vocabulary building techniques? Were they practicing comprehension skills characteristic of narrative prose but tested on expository paragraphs requiring study skills?

I would hazard the guess that individualized reading of the type described by Veatch--this is an assumption to be verified--fosters different kinds of reading competence from those measured by standardized tests like the Metropolitan. That is, self-selection and pacing, when the choice of books is wide, and competent individualized teaching is based on these books, will probably improve developmental skills among average-to-poor readers. The aim of individualized approaches is to develop children into willing readers. But for most pupils beyond primary grades, our aim is to make [illegible] out of readers. Encouraging children to read, but failing to teach them how to study, is a serious limitation of the individualized approach. It is a limitation that is perhaps underscored by Mr. Lawson's results.

But we have been speculating on the results of a single study--exactly what we said we should not do. A considerable number of single studies comparing individualized and ability grouping approaches have been reported--most of them masters' theses or doctoral dissertations. By March 1964, Groff had listed 54 such studies. He listed these but he did not evaluate or synthesize the results. It would have been impossible to do so since the studies vary so widely in their operational definitions of individualized reading and in the grade levels at which they were executed. Unless single studies are replicated using standard procedures and measurements, there is no reason to put much faith in the findings of, say, 27 studies than in the single one we have examined today.

The implications for research from the study are easy to state, much harder to implement. Obviously, if we are to test the effects of individualized reading approaches <u>versus</u> ability grouping with basal

readers, we need a cooperative study designed to account for teacher variables, covering a full year at one grade level, treating similar pupils, and measuring a broad spectrum of reading skills and attitudes.

I don't believe, however, that such a study would answer important questions. Mr. Lawson has derived an appropriate inference from his study--that is, "reading ability may be improved by the use of more than a single method of instruction." I am sure that a broad study would confirm this judgment. I don't see the value of engaging in "versus" studies, pitting one method against another. Good teaching restlessly cuts across all methods. I am convinced, however, of the need for cooperative research especially at the upper grade levels. The aim of such research should not be to verify "one best method" but should seek answers to why any one of several methods might prove effective (or indeed ineffective) with pupils of well-defined characteristics.

Mr. Grant's study suggests the possibilities for exploring the effects of highly recommended teaching strategies. Perhaps wisely he limited himself to a very narrow aspect of purpose: a thought-directing question given before reading a specific selection. The investigation of purposeful reading is a promising avenue of research, and we have recently had at least one major exploration at the ninth grade level--the study recently completed at Chicago by Helen K. Smith and available now from the U. S. Office of Education. Smith defines purpose as the application of specific reading skills such as reading for details, for main ideas, for generalizations, and the like, and has designed tests for measuring these. Although this approach is somewhat different from Mr. Grant's, his objectives are similar to hers. In extending his research

into purposeful reading at sixth grade level, Mr. Grant may want to study Smith's design.

Even in this neat first study, Mr. Grant has opened up problems. I think we may disregard his findings for the below-average and above-average readers, since it wasn't a good idea in the first place to assign material either at frustration level or at mastery level for study-type reading. What we should like to know now is whether or not the poorest readers might react as the average readers did when the selection assigned is at their instructional level. Suppose that poor readers do not profit from a pre-reading question even when the material is supposedly within their range. What are the possible reasons? How can they be explored? Is length of the article a factor? Does the single-question strategy oversimplify the problems of comprehension? Would not previous knowledge of the topic make a difference? How much can we infer from the reading of a single article? The basic weakness of this study is that it probes an insufficient sample of behavior. We need a larger sampling of study-type materials to which the skill of reading for main ideas can be applied. We need some ways of examining why the thought-directing question helps (or fails to help). For example, we should have some measure of the readers' previous knowledge of the topic, and their interest in it. We should assess their attitudes before and after reading. A series of experiments like this with the same group of children would, of course, develop into a teaching situation rather than a controlled experiment. We would have to test, therefore, for the overall effects. After such an experience what would happen to students' reading of study-type materials when no one proposes a pre-reading question? The kind of study I am

suggesting would not yield hard data that can be easily subjected to statistical analysis, but it would lay bare the complexities and thus show statisticians the kinds of questions for which we need refined measurement techniques, or--until we get them--the frank acceptance of non-statistical data for what they are worth. I believe that non-statistical analyses of the reading process are worth a great deal at this stage of innocence in educational research. Introspective accounts such as those used by Strang, Thackeray, Mathiley, Squire, (to name a few) yield soft data but they offer far-reaching insights into the business of teaching reading and are more valuable to teachers and researchers than the over-simplified, statistically manipulated.

Let me draw these random remarks and ruminations to a quick conclusion. I have demonstrated, as well as stated, that research is confusing. So be it. What we desperately need as members of reading is not the courage of our convictions. What we need (as John Gardner has said in a broader context) is the courage of our confusions--the courage to teach, to evaluate, to be baffled by our results, and humbled by the pitifully small answers we discover--yet the courage to keep on asking why--the courage, that is, of our confusions.